

Curses, charms, and magic in the ancient world

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Scholars are getting more and more interested in ancient magic – here Moreed Arbabzadah conjures up an introduction to the mystical world of ancient curses and spells.

Life in the ancient world could be harsh. Inexplicable illness or misfortune could strike at any time; the structure of society concentrated power and access to justice in the hands of a fortunate few; the gods could seem remote and capricious. Casting a magic spell or curse to punish an enemy or captivate a lover offered a chance to get even or even get ahead, or at least to feel that you had taken action. We can see this clearly in a fourth-century A.D. spell, pictured below, in which a slave named Politoria tries to stop her mistress from sending her to the *ergastulum*, or punishment cell.

In the past the study of such magical spells or curses, often regarded as a ‘primitive’ aspect of the Greco-Roman world, was somewhat outside the mainstream. Today, though, anyone familiar with the Cambridge Latin Course will find that ancient magic even features there, a sure sign of acceptance – look at ‘Stage 22’! At the same time, certain features of ancient magical practices suggest that it understood its own outsider status and made deliberate use of it – as we will see, ancient curses and charms could invoke marginal deities, use strange mystical symbols, and hint at Egyptian connections to make themselves and their practitioners seem exotic and powerful. We see this too in Politoria’s curse: the author has used magical symbols to make her spell feel more powerful. It is useful to remember, too, that at various times and places certain practices (like some forms of divination and prophecy in ancient Rome) were illegal or taboo and considered to be ‘magic’, in contrast with mainstream religion, which was perfectly acceptable – though modern scholars can find the line between religion and magic hard to determine.

Ancient magic could take various forms. Spoken spells, of course, leave no trace behind for us to study. Sometimes objects were invested with magical properties like these 5th-century A.D. ‘voodoo dolls’ of embracing lovers, found with a love spell wrapped round them. And

sometimes, as in this case, spells could be written down. Fragments of papyrus spell-books survive in the dry desert sand of Egypt, written out using a mixture of Greek letters and magical symbols, sometimes with handy gaps for the name of the intended victim.

A plague on you: ancient curse tablets

Some of the most important primary texts for anyone studying magic in the ancient world are called ‘curse tablets’. Curse tablets are small sheets of lead, which was soft enough to write on by scratching the words with a stylus, on which the author wrote a magical curse in order to make something happen. Known Greek examples date from as early as the 5th century B.C., with the Romans starting to produce Latin ones from the 2nd century B.C. We tend to call these by the Latin term *defixio* or the Greek term *katadesmos*, both of which mean ‘binding spell’. Both the Latin and the Greek nouns refer to the idea of magically restraining an enemy by ‘binding’ them, thereby preventing them from performing a certain action.

The curses themselves usually instruct a daemon or a god associated with the underworld to carry out some action upon someone or something, often thieves or rival lovers. By far the most common deity addressed in spells is Hermes, who as mediator between gods and men (and something of a trickster himself) was well placed to carry out the requests, but other gods like Hekate and Hades are often named – gods slightly outside the mainstream Olympian canon, as seems to have befitted magical activities, and often associated with witchcraft, trickery, and especially the underworld.

After the text had been written, the soft lead tablets were usually rolled or folded up and then sometimes pierced with a metal nail. Since the addressees were usually gods of the underworld, these tablets were deposited in places that were thought to be connected with the underworld, in order to enhance the power of the

curse. Often an underground body of water (such as a well, bath, or fountain) was chosen, a less benign (but perhaps related) version of the modern tourist practice of throwing coins in. Roman Britain is especially important for the study of curse tablets because such a large proportion of the Latin tablets that have been excavated were found here, such as those thrown into the holy well at Bath, a magical place where hot springs came bubbling up from the ground. Some can still be seen in the Roman museum at Bath.

For an even closer connection to the underworld a curse tablet could be buried with a corpse, preferably the body of someone who had died an untimely or violent death. This was because it was thought that the souls of those who had died suddenly lingered in a restless state near the grave until it was ‘their time’ and so could – like Hermes, Hecate, or Hades – act as a mediator between the living and the powers of the underworld. Sometimes, the curse tablet even addresses the corpse with which it has been buried, promising it peace if it carries out its appointed task.

How unsporting: ancient curses at the games

What sort of curses did these ancient tablets contain? The contents of the spells usually allow them to be classified in one of the following categories:

1. Competition in the theatre, amphitheatre and circus
2. Love spells
3. Legal/political disputes
4. Business disputes (e.g. concerning shops and taverns)
5. Counterspells (similar to amulets, but focussed on specific threats).

Particularly common in the first category are curses that were meant to affect competitors in chariot races held in the circus. Their prevalence is perhaps understandable given how much was at stake: charioteers could earn a fortune (see e.g. Juvenal, *Satire* 7.112–14), and enormous amounts of betting went on at the games. There also seems to have been a high degree of rivalry between supporters of the different factions or teams (identified

by their red, blue, white, and green racing colours) – even as late as the 6th century A.D. the historian Procopius commented that in every city you could divide the population according to whether they supported the Blue or Green faction.

Curses against charioteers were sometimes buried within the race-course at the starting gates to increase their potency, just as love spells were to be deposited in or near to the home of the target. The curse tablet pictured here as a line drawing is a good example. It dates from perhaps the 3rd century A.D. and was found in a tomb in Hadrumentum (modern Sousse in Tunisia), an important town whose loyalty to Rome since the days of the Punic wars allowed it to grow and prosper. It had a large hippodrome for chariot races that was comparable in size to the ones at Carthage and Lepcis Magna, so it is unsurprising that curse tablets related to the chariot races have been found there.

Here is a (slightly adapted) version of a section of the text of this tablet (see if you can find some of the words in the picture):

Demando tibi ut equos prasini et albi crucies, occidas, et agitatores Clarum et Felicem et Primulum et Romanum occidas.

I ask you to injure and strike down the horses of the Green and the White charioteers, and (I ask you) to strike down the charioteers Clarus and Felix and Primulus and Romanus.

Whilst the verb *occidas* could mean ‘kill’, in this context it would probably be more natural to take it as ‘strike down’ or ‘knock over’, because curses against charioteers and their horses often express the wish that the horses fall over: the author wants the horses to be injured and to fall, probably during the race. Dramatic crashes were part of the spectacle of chariot racing, and it is easy to imagine a devoted race-goer wishing for this to happen to his team’s rivals.

Here’s another sports-related curse, this time against a *uenator* or hunter called Gallicus. The *uenatores* were like gladiators except that they fought against animals:

Obliga Gallicum ut neque ursum neque taurum occidat.

Restrain Gallicus so that he might kill neither a bear nor a bull.

Here the verb used is *oblige*, meaning ‘bind, fasten, restrain’. We see here an idea common to many curse tablets, namely the desire to restrain someone in order to prevent them from doing something (remember that we tend to call them *defixiones*, binding spells). In the previous curse tablet we saw a direct request to the deity to carry out the actions *occidas* and

crucies. Here, however, the deity is asked merely to restrain Gallicus from doing something – but the effect might have been just as deadly.

Lucky charms: magical amulets for health and happiness

A different sort of ancient magical item was the protective amulet. Whilst curse tablets would be buried somewhere after they had been written, magical amulets were rolled up, placed in a little capsule and worn on a necklace, giving constant protection to the wearer. Amulets are sometimes also called phylacteries, from the Greek word for ‘protection’ (cf. Greek *phuláttō* ‘I guard’). This word ‘phylactery’ therefore emphasizes another aspect of amulets: they are usually defined as defensive magic meant to protect someone, in contrast with curse tablets, which were fundamentally offensive magic. Curse tablets were supposed to make something happen; amulets were there to stop things happening. Another important difference is that amulets (worn on the person) are usually made of an attractive precious metal (gold or silver), whereas curse tablets (left in the ground) are almost always made of lead alloys.

Here’s the text (slightly adapted) from the last four lines of an amulet found in Norfolk in 2003, in a garden in Billingford – it’s pictured above:

Date salutem et uictoriam Tiberium Claudium Similem quem peperit Herennia Marcellina.

Give health and victory to Tiberius Claudius Similis, whom Herennia Marcellina bore.

Here the implicit subjects of the imperative *date* – the gods doing the giving – are various divine magical entities mentioned earlier in the text, and the beneficiary is carefully named to make sure the health and victory wished for end up with the right person.

We also see here another interesting aspect of many Greco-Roman magical texts: the person named in the text is often identified both by their name and by their mother’s name. Here we have Tiberius Claudius Similis named as the son of Herennia Marcellina. This practice is sometimes described as identification by ‘matrilineal filiation’ or ‘matrilineal descent’. This is unusual, since it was not a normal practice in everyday Greek and Roman life: in public life it was usual to be identified in a *patrilineal* fashion, by one’s name and one’s father’s name (‘Gaius, son of Julius’).

This use of matrilineal descent in spells has, in recent times, generally been explained as an imitation of the common Egyptian practice of tracing descent

through the mother, a practice evident in both magical and non-magical Egyptian documents. The fact that the practice was unusual and associated with the exotic appeal of Egypt probably helped it to spread, with its abnormality making it seem magical and powerful. Alongside the magical symbols of spellbooks, the appeals to underworld gods, the use of shady underworld places to bury curses, and the ‘nonsense’ magic words that sometimes appear on curse tablets, this is another reminder that magic thrived, paradoxically, by making a place for itself on the margins and positioning itself as something unusual: an alternative source of power and influence in an uncertain world.

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